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On the Worship of Money

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Edward Varga

Dinner party guests can make or break an evening. It's a universal truth that at least one of those people you offered a free meal to in return for pleasant conversation will turn into a kracken-sized money braggartpure.

Usually it happens during that part of the evening where someone starts talking about the two-week long vacation they just took in Belize, where it was sunny every day and the bronzed and toned, half-naked locals brought fresh mangoes to their bedsides ever hour on the hour and delicately slipped the dripping pieces of fruit into their waiting mouths. Then they will laugh and flap a hand at the air and say, "Oh! It was to die for!"

Do they even have mangoes in Belize? Who knows? Who cares? It's bad form to fact-check your guests in the middle of their, "the ocean there is bluer than anything I've ever seen before," story, so don't do it, even though you know they would if you had said such an outlandish thing.

As the host of that hypothetical dinner party, you want to be able to top their story but it's hard to when your guests are sitting on the best couch you could afford at the Goodwill and drinking tap water out of a set of Star Wars glasses you collected when you were in high school.

For most, money is validation, pure and simple. It's a yardstick we wear on our backs and drive to the grocery store. Right now my yardstick is fourteen years old, has 285,000 miles on it and I drive it to WalMart.

Gone for me are the days when I cared about proving myself monetarily. I just turned fifty. I've got one son from my first marriage in college, and the other son from my second entering fifth grade. All I do is spend what I make, mostly on the people whom I cherish. What good is collecting it?

I have a friend on Facebook whom I went to high school with who just posted about the \$15,000 gas grill they just had delivered to their pristine backyard. In the mean time, I'm burning my wieners on a charcoal fired Weber with a wobbly leg. That sort of thing used to bother me. Then I turned fifty.

From this vantage point on the collective "hill" which I am now over, I can see forward to the bottom and notice there isn't much there. Money will not cushion my fall into the grave. Nope. In fact, I feel sure that if I did have an enormous pile of cash beckoning me toward retirement, all it would leave me with is more to complain about, dollar bills glued together into three sirens seducing me to crash my ship into the rocks.

The value of money, it turns out, is a matter of perspective. Some use it to rate how much they think of themselves. Others use it to gauge how they want others to think of them. I used to be guilty of both of those crimes. Maybe once in a while I still am, but my goal is to leave behind more than credit card receipts after I'm gone.

I look at my eldest son who is studying film-making and hope I can pass my perspective on disregarding the importance of money to him. I am not instructing him to actively pursue poverty (the major in film-making will probably take care of that) but I want him to know there are so many more important things in this world to focus on. Find someone with a great deal more money than they will ever need in one life, and I bet you've found the most vapid and boring

person in the room. Don't be that person.

Visit www.VanityFair.com for more on the Worship of Money

What sort of person would I like you to be? Allow me to sum up my essay in one sentence to answer your question. Ready? Here it comes.

Do not educate yourself so that you make money, educate yourself so you may deserve the money you make.

Boo-ya! Nothing but net! He shoots, he scores! Fifty years of sucking oxygen on this planet and that's what I've learned, and that's what I want you to know. Earn your right to exist! Volunteer. Make sacrifices. Marry for love. Walk to the store instead of driving. Go to Church. Spend time with your family. Help someone less fortunate. Read books. Get a good night's sleep. But above all, be grateful for whatever you end up having.

If I was a little handier, instead of writing this essay I'd be rendering lye soap over the fire and churning butter right now. It wouldn't be so I could save money, or because I can't afford to buy soap or butter, but because those are the kinds of stories I want to hear at a dinner party. Don't tell me how you just purchased a marble dog house with leather trim and a memory foam dog bed for your purebred, five digit price tag, Juilliard School educated, toilet drinker, because I will only think less of you, not more. Money can't make you intelligent; it can only make you sad.

Perhaps Benjamin Franklin's, Poor Richard, was speaking of the worship of money when he said, "Wise men learn by others' harms, fools by their own." I trust Ben's wisdom, since he dressed like the Quaker Oats guy. It's like having a British accent. You get automatic intelligence points. In fact, picture me dressed like Ben Franklin, then go back to the top of this essay and read it again. Then you'll know I'm right for sure.